



Pottstown Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

568 High Street

Pottstown, PA

Officers: President, David Kerns, Vice President, Robert Evans, Treasurer, Barbara Toroney. Assistant Treasurer, Marie Kelly, Recording Secretary, Laura Groth, Corresponding Secretary, Jean Sweeney

Editor: David Kerns

July 1, 2017

Website: www.pottstownhistory.org

e-mail: pottstownhistory@gmail.com

July Meeting – Monday July 17th, 7pm

The July 17th program will be *at Ringing Rocks Park* in Lower Pottsgrove, just outside of Pottstown. Meet in the Pavilion at 7:00pm, where Glenn Isett from the Lower Pottsgrove Historical Society, will talk about the history and the attractions of this grand old park.

Please come early: picnic box suppers, beverages, and hammers will be available for all at 6:00pm, with time to try your skill at making music on the rocks or exploring the nature path. (Donations will be accepted to defray the costs of supper and the Pavilion. OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. Enter from Route 663 on the north-west side of Pottstown or from N. Keim Street on the east side. GPS address: 815 White Pine Lane, Pottstown, PA 19464)

Library Hours

July 2017: 9th & 23th 1-4pm

August 2017: 13th & 27th 1-4pm

Welcome New Members

Charlie and Kathy Valentine

Acquisitions

David Rote of Arizona donated a photo of his great grandfather, Benjamin Guest, a Pottstown Civil War veteran and supporting Civil War documents.

D. Hoepp of Cherry Hill, NJ, donated a photograph of the old Owl's Nest home on High Street during July 4th festivities.

Julia Greham donated a letter from Annie Potts to Henry W. Potts.

Walking Tour

A big thank you to all the volunteers of the 2017 Walking Tour and to those who attended. A special thank you to Mr. Scott Bentley for opening the Ellis Mills building for the Tour's participants.

In Memoriam

Our hearts go out to Laura Bierman and family on the passing of her husband, Linn. Laura was a long-time board member and a hostess at our general meetings.

Donations Needed!

Please don't forget about our 'sad' collection of Pottstown Directories and assorted books. They're crying out for help to be repaired.

It costs a minimum of \$70 per book to have them rebound and happy again. These Directories are a wonderful research aid and when restored this collection will be a wealth of information for generations to come. Thanks to member donations, we've been

able to rebind a few of the Directories this year and hope to be able to continue to do more.

To donate, please write a check made out to the "Pottstown Historical Society" and on the memo line, state that it's for "Book Project". Donors will have their name place on the inside cover. Thank you!

Origins of Memorial Park

Today we enjoy activities in our local park. We have baseball fields, a bike and skateboard track and a spray park for all to use in our community. It hosts events like the Volleyball Rumble and the Go Fourth!, to name a few. But ask yourself, how did we come to have this great asset to the town?

We can trace its roots back to our founder, John Potts. He purchased 995 acres of land in 1751 from Jasper and William McCall. By 1761, Potts was laying out the plans for a town he called, Pottsgrove.

In 1855 the Gabel brothers, Henry and Jacob purchased the Mill Park farm from Jasper Ives, to run a grist mill. This property was mostly comprised of the land our founder, John Potts, had purchased back in 1751.

The land had multiple uses over the years. The Gabel brothers leased out the manor as a hotel and the farm's mill and land to local farmers.

Colebrookdale Railroad contracted a right of way through the property in 1867 and a mile-long race track for horses was leased and laid out in 1875 on 60 acres of the land. Even the PA National Guard had an encampment on the land in July 1881, known as Camp Reno.

Over time, the property size increased to over 200 acres. It hosted fairs and circuses, including a five-day

fair in September 1886 which drew about 3000 people a day and made over \$10,000 in receipts. It adapted over time as the age of the Automobile came along. The horse track was used testing Chadwick cars and the Flying Merkel motorcycle. It was used to race automobiles too, however, many people sustained severe injuries and even death, due to the track not properly banked for this type of racing.

Fast forward to 1919, when after WWI, John Saylor, of the Pottstown Rotary Club, started a plan to buy 40 acres of the Mill Park property along the Manatawny Creek to dedicate as a memorial park to the veterans of the war. They needed to raise \$75,000 to purchase this land from the Gabel estate. However, they were unable to raise the money needed and by 1929 the Great Depression ended all hope for this memorial park.

The Pottstown Kiwanis Club was looking for a civic project to undertake and decided to pursue the memorial park project that had been previously been abandoned. They traveled to Virginia to meet a Mr. Himelright, an heir to the Gabel estate. He refused to sell the land but were able to convince his wife to sell the island and then through further efforts, a piece of the meadow.

The Kiwanis Club sold chartered memberships for \$100 and hosted carnivals to raise money to buy the land and the largest donation to this fundraising effort came from a Gabel brothers heir.

The Club began to clear the land and Jack Swavelly, of Bethlehem Steel, was able to secure 900 carloads of dirt to help level off the land. However, the park flooded in 1942 and discouraged the club's efforts and left them feeling overwhelmed by the undertaking.

The project was turned over to a non-profit group, Memorial Park Association and Pottstown Playgrounds, Inc, and they were able to complete the purchase of the park from the Barbara Fitzsimmons estate by 1945.

Throughout the 1950s, Pottstown area civic clubs helped to improve the park in various ways to make it the recreational area Pottstown residents have come to enjoy today. In keeping with the original intent for a memorial park to honor veterans, the park has war memorials honoring WWII and Vietnam veterans and a Veterans Honor Walk.